



CHILD CARE

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CONNECTIONS



FATHERS CARING FOR THEIR CHILDREN

By Dave Riley, Ph.D.

A change is afoot. The role of the father, which has changed in the past, may be changing anew.

Certainly the popular view of what a father can be has been changed over the years. Of course, reality lags far behind the discussion.

Only a few men are experimenting with being the primary caretakers of their children. The less dramatic but equally interesting news concerns average American families. National surveys have reported the first evidence that average American working men are beginning to get more involved in child care. (This was true only for those whose wives were also employed.)

Should we welcome these changes?

The research of recent decades (see Lamb, 1997) has discovered few hereditary or hormonal advantages for women as caretakers of children (with the exception of breastfeeding). Fathers have the same physiological response to an infant's cry, and in the first hours after birth, a time some theorists consider a "critical period in early bonding," uncoached fathers and mothers go through the very same sequence of earliest parental behaviors. The moment-to-moment interactions of fathers with their infants are different — they are more physically playful — but they are no less sensitive to the child.

Infants and toddlers form secure attachments with their fathers as well as with their mothers. Research across other cultures and with other primate species shows this, so there is no biological imperative requiring inflexible parental roles. The question is not, "Are men capable parents?" It is "Under what conditions will they perform capably?"

If men do become more involved in child rearing, is that necessarily better than the traditional roles that seemed to work for our grandparents? There are pros and cons, but the

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benefits of such a change are difficult to ignore.

First, a higher level of paternal involvement in child rearing is associated with benefits for children, especially sons, in the areas of intellectual growth, school performance, social development, self-esteem, and sex-role identity. (The most complete summary of research findings is in Lamb 1997). Interestingly, young boys' development of a firm male identity is enhanced by having a warm, nurturant, involved father, much more so than having a stereotyped macho father. Apparently it's not the image of the man that counts; it's the quality of the relationship.

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Second, a higher level of paternal child rearing is certainly a benefit to mothers. Women in this country have long been increasing their outside employment, with nary a budge in men's involvement in household tasks. It is little wonder that one of the causes of men becoming more involved in child care appears to be their wives pushing them into it.

But men have their own reasons. Many men today, especially those with young children, report they would prefer to work fewer hours even if it meant less pay. They aren't rejecting the breadwinner role — even nontraditional parents see the breadwinner role as primary — but they say the breadwinner role isn't enough. They don't always have easy words to explain it, but they feel somehow incomplete, and they seek a life that feels whole.

Research suggests we should listen to these men, because it looks like fatherhood is good for them as well as for their families. It engenders self-awareness and personal growth. And men who are more actively involved in the parental role gain more from it. They are emotionally healthier and better adjusted (Heath 1978).

Those are the benefits. Chief among the costs is the man's career. Men who increase their child rearing involvement often change their work hours or jobs to make it possible (Radin 1982). The company knows it can no longer count on their 100 percent commitment, since they have tangibly shown they have an important commitment to their families. Career advancement is put on the slow track.

Where are we headed?

There is no doubt that mothers will continue to work outside the home. Not only is the income needed, but many women need the challenges and satisfactions of paid employment. As a result, the need for men to contribute more in the home mounts.

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asserting, "I am more than a worker. I am also a parent."

One must wonder if men's yearning for home-role involvement will remain strong in an economic era of uncertainty. The involvement of fathers in child rearing is small potatoes, indeed, compared to the number one problem of many American families today: economic instability. Many of the obstacles to increased paternal child rearing are in the workplace: protection against forced overtime, the choice of part-time work for proportionally less pay, flexible work schedules, the right to care for one's sick child or to take paternity leave without workplace punishment, the alternative of job-sharing. These are some of the hinges upon which increased participation by fathers in child rearing participation may well turn.

Many men today are paddling tentatively in the shallows of child rearing responsibility. A few have ventured into deeper water, but these are complex changes we are talking about, with multiple causes and networks of constraints.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead once noted that fathers are a biological necessity but a social accident. She was not far wrong. But to say that fathering is an accident makes it sound both random and unimportant. We know that fathers play a crucial role in family functioning and child development. Fathers are not a social accident, they are a social invention, reinvented to fit the adaptive needs of each age.

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PRACTICAL WAYS TO INVOLVE FATHERS IN CHILD CARE

By Richard L. Sale, Ph.D.

Traditionally, mothers have been responsible for child care; however, in today's society, fathers are becoming more involved in their children's care. Fathers have assumed this increasing role in the emotional, social, and physical development of their children due to more mothers being in the labor force. At the same time, more children are spending time in child care centers, with approximately 29 million children in some type of child care setting. All of these details point to the importance of considering how fathers can be involved in child care settings.

Several factors are important to the quality of the child care setting. *Parental involvement* is one of the most important aspects. Quality child care centers will always welcome parental visits and involvement in their programs. Communication of the workers with both the mother and the father can be helpful in children having a positive experience in the child care center. *Providing non-sexist equipment and experiences for children* is another important aspect of quality child care. This can involve having toys and other items that invite the involvement of both boys and girls. Also, when

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Early Childhood Excellence

Actual vignettes of "Promising Practices" from Wisconsin's Early Childhood Centers for Excellence

SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR!

Encompass Child Care, Inc.
Rosebush Center in Green Bay, Wisconsin

A father arrives to drop off his infant daughter. The teacher chats with the father as she takes the girl's coat off, asking if she slept this morning. When the father kisses his daughter and begins to leave, the teacher squats by her on the floor and says, "Say goodbye Dad". The infant continues playing with a toy, so the teacher picks her up and shows her Dad by the door. The child now looks contentedly at her father. The teacher tells him "Have a good day" as he leaves.

This teacher has built a good relationship with the father, who has become comfortable in the arrival routine. The teacher promotes a two-way sharing of information, which is essential to providing good care for infants and toddlers. Then the teacher makes sure the child acknowledges the parent's departure. This helps the child deal with any separation distress by building a sense of predictability and control. This will help as she moves through a phase of greater separation anxiety in the months ahead. It also helps alleviate the *parent's* separation distress by recognizing the parent's connection to the child.

TALK YOURSELF INTO TRUSTING

Menominee Tribal Day Care
Keshena, Wisconsin

The teacher greets a father, who has come to visit his infant son. She tells the father what his son did during the morning - sat up for a while playing with toys. Dad explains how they give him time to lay on his tummy and push up with his arms. The teacher hands the infant to his father, saying, "Have some bonding time." Dad asks about what abilities to expect at his child's age, and she replies that each child is unique.

The teacher's friendly greeting and willingness to chat helps build a trusting relationship with this parent. She tries to make him feel welcome to visit and spend time with his son in the center. She answers his questions about development. This kind of time spent together sharing information about the child helps to ensure consistency of care for the baby, and helps parents feel comfortable about the care their child is receiving. The teacher gains information about the child's experiences at home and the parent's child rearing practices and goals. This sense of partnership benefits parents, child and caregiver.





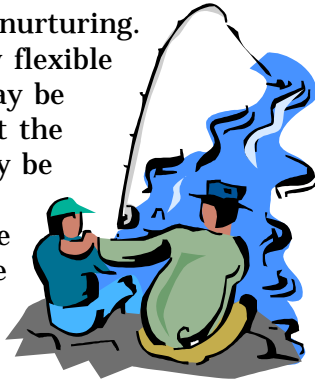
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providing stories to or examples to the children, it is important to show how both boys and girls can do these jobs or be involved different activities in their communities. Fathers' involvement in the child care center can illustrate how men can be nurturing.

Some fathers have very flexible work schedules, so they may be available to provide help at the child care center. They may be willing to come during the day when mothers, who are now working outside of the home, are not available.

At a recent conference for workers who are involved in child care centers, home care centers, and after-school programs, the participants made the following suggestions to involve fathers in child care:



- ⇒ Ask a father to drive a van for a trip that the child care center is taking.
- ⇒ Invite a father to come to the child care centers and tell about his job or career. If the job is in a setting that might be interesting and safe for children, the father might host the children at his place of work. Or, the father might conduct an "on-site" field trip by bringing items from his work to show the children. An example of this would be a firefighter bringing his equipment and uniform.
- ⇒ Ask a father to be on the child care center advisory board. The input of parents in helping the center set policy or to evaluate its programs is valuable to the success of the child care center.

- ⇒ Invite fathers to come and demonstrate their hobbies. This can involve traditional male domains such as fishing, or it can involve a father who is good at crafts or cooking.
- ⇒ Invite fathers to come at story time and read to the children.
- ⇒ Have the fathers plan a camping trip for the children. If the children are young, it can be a day trip spent in nature and can involve cooking outside.
- ⇒ Host a "Father's Day Social" in which the fathers come and perform skits.
- ⇒ Sponsor a "Bring A Dad to School Day."
- ⇒ Have a father-child basketball tournament.
- ⇒ Host a father-child fashion show.
- ⇒ Sponsor a father-child fishing tournament.

For all events that include fathers and their children, it is important for child care center workers to make sure all of the children have a father who can be involved, or have other fathers who are willing to "adopt" children for the event.

It is important to involve all parents in the child care program, but child care centers may want to make a special effort to involve the fathers since some may need extra encouragement to actively participate. By taking advantage of the changing role of fathers in their children's lives and encouraging their participation, child care centers can enhance their child care program and help fathers to enrich their children's lives.

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